Note by LMB: This personal essay was the result of some on-line conversation and reaction to reader reviews for *The Sharing Knife*, my fantasy-romance cross-genre tetrology; putting my thoughts in order, some of which later came out in my Worldcon speech. I'm still bemused by the prudishness of some SF readers when confronted with sex-positive scenes compared to the Romance-reader crowd, and this in a genre that includes some of the most repellent negative sex scenes I've ever read. But it's probably not the same sub-group of SF readers.

Lois McMaster Bujold, copyright 12/12/06

Writing Sex

A recent on-line conversation put into high relief for me an interesting writing problem: how to write about sexual issues for the broadest possible audience, without either boring the desensitized, or dropping the sensitive overboard. I now think it's a head-space issue, and it might be enlightening to detail my own travels through those changing zones.

I have seen, and been part of, exchanges of vast mutual incomprehension between the sexually shy or reticent and the sexually active (physically or only mentally); one of the more peculiar of which is that both parties can think the other must be lying about their experience. "Real people (like the kind I know or think I know) aren't like that, are they? Not possible!"

My own pubescent fantasizing, once I learned enough to have some, was mostly focused on fictional characters to whom I was emotionally attached; it gradually came to seem some sort of violation to me to so use real ones. (RPS, Real Person Slash, still squicks me deeply; I can't help processing it as a species of slander, so that's where I draw my personal boundary-of-taste.)

I also draw a personal line between unreal porn–written or drawn–and the vid version, which must necessarily involve real people, and tow a boatload of more complex issues. (This medium still squicks me, too, but perhaps in my tiny sample I just haven't seen the better sort.) Comedy visual porn gets a pass, oddly enough, perhaps through being sufficiently unreal or unthreatening as to get past my filters, but neither do I find it erotic. I will therefore mostly be talking about the imaginary, written kind.

Soon after my marriage, when I was initially trying to figure all this stuff out, I had my husband take me into one of Those Stores, which, despite being a bookstore, was a bit uncomfortable, although he also reported that the few other customers there that morning found my presence made them uncomfortable, too. (I didn't notice. I focus.) We picked out a couple of books, I took them home and read them, and found them profoundly anti-erotic. They made sex look, to my eyes, ugly and stupid. (I didn't know, then, about this men's commercial stuff being written to a reading comprehension level well below my own.) If an interest in sex was to render one ugly and stupid, I would take a pass, thanks. If this was porn, I wanted nothing to do with it, end of survey. The people who read this stuff must

either be aliens, or crazy. (In long retrospect, I realize that if my poor ex had harbored any secret hopes for the consequences of this expedition, they must have been quite sadly dashed.)

So the problem of Taking It Personally (and not in a good way) is one I share or have shared, and I quite understand it.

(It may have been an accident of the sampling. I mean, I like dogs, but not in that *way*, and the trope where the guy fires a gun into the woman's private parts made me feel strangely unwelcome, for some reason. See Haldeman's "The Hemingway Hoax" for another writer apparently processing that one. I didn't make it past that scene in his novella. Once was more than enough for one lifetime.)

Meanwhile, I'd also discovered the romance genre, but this was the late '60s, early '70s, and all the books I encountered ended with the proposal, or at most a fade to black. Not at all like the modern, much more useful sex-ed versions. No connection here between romance and real grotty sex. Or even between mind and body. Not helpful.

So anyway, sometime in the early '80s a female friend passed along some slash fanfic 'zines, which I read with rising eyebrows. Till around 6 AM, if I recall correctly. And the light dawned in more ways than one. This was the sort of riveted interest those other books were apparently supposed to have been having on their intended audiences (which did not include me.) But at least I was now able to extrapolate. And porn in general, now assimilated at a remove, became a much less threatening topic to me. (Well, OK, still not the guns and other misogynistic hostility.) I also, eventually, figured out fetish and how it works, so a lot of other stuff which is Not My Turn-On became at least comprehensible, and not simply insane-looking.

As a side note, I am now wondering if all sexual turn-on (eroticism, the stuff that makes your pupils widen despite yourself, as distinguished from romance–they are indeed two different things) isn't a species of fetish, merely that the most common and approved is that of having a fetish about healthy members of the opposite sex of reproductive age. But it all works the same way using the same circuits down in the crocodile-brain. Still thinking about that one. If you eliminated all persons who harbored at least some sort of fetish or focus-of-interest, would there be anyone left?

In my much-later reading, at least two SF books lost me as a reader permanently by repellent sex scenes, one toward the end of a book, another in the very first scene. I've never read anything by either of those two writers again. So a misstep handling this stuff can indeed be fatal to, if not a writer's career, a certain portion of their readership.

Part of the problem was that the scenes in question actually were repellent, but part of the problem was in me as a (then) non-desensitized reader. They leaped out at me. Certain subjects–sex for many readers, violence for a few, other elements for others–are received more acutely by the psyche. It then becomes like the problem of balance for a sound engineer, calibrating various frequencies to the hearing of the audience. I posit that in order for a sex scene to "read" level with the surrounding text (in material not intended to be erotic), to a large audience that may contain a lot of non-desensitized readers, content may have to actually be stopped down, muted, or even fade to black.

"One man's meat is another man's poison" is never so true than in literary sex scenes; or, to drop the irresistible double entendre and broaden the scope, one person's turn-on is another person's turn-off. Woe the writer who mistakes his/her own fetishes for human sexuality generally, for example. Specifics that may be working well for the writer may well have an unintended opposite effect on a sensitive reader, or just one who has wildly varying tastes.

The Sharing Knife was from the get-go intended to be a romance where the characters' various sexual problems were quite central to the plot, so fade-to-black was not an option for certain key scenes. It proved to be mainly a challenge of tone rather than subject matter. The goal was romantic rather than erotic, explicit but not graphic. Leaving out the short words, letting the tab-a-slot-b details fall between the lines, and avoiding gigglesome euphemisms all seemed to contribute. Hence also the use of well-placed strategic vagueness, invisible ellipses as it were. (Although those deliberate lacunae may have been what caused the scene to read "not smoothly" to one apparently desensitized reader. S/he may well have been picking up on or stumbling over the places where specifics ought to have been but were deliberately left out.)

At one point I was considering writing that scene as all-dialog, for some of the above reasons. Except that, after a while, people usually stop talking. And Fawn getting a handle on these major elements of her life was a hugely important event in her character development; trying to find answers to her original welter of questions and going to the wrong source for the withheld specifics was what got her into trouble, in all senses, in the first place. And the effects on Dag mattered, too. So.

Reader-response has still been wildly varied, as a quick perusal of *TSK*'s Amazon reviews will prove. (Which is actually the usual state for reader-response, I have to admit.) Genre conventions are something of a code term for reader expectations; half the negative reviews on TSK were from folks saying, "But this wasn't the book I was expecting!" Simultaneously, the readers demand freshness and originality in each new book from a writer. This turns out to not be quite the case, for some who only seem to want certain very narrow kinds of freshness and originality. No coloring outside the lines, to be sure, and they are very nonplussed when the writer turns the paper over and draws another picture altogether.

Ta, L.